

Stillwater NewsPress

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Marshal: Firewise saves lives and property through education

By Megan Sando

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STILLWATER, Okla. — After the damaging wildfires of 2012, the Stillwater Fire Department decided there is a better way to protect homes and businesses in the future.

This month, Stillwater became a designated Firewise community by the Oklahoma Forestry Services, a yearlong process.

Over the last decade, the number of acres burned by wildfires have increased in Oklahoma, according to a community risk assessment.

Homes most at risk for wildfires are located in the southeast and southwest portions of Stillwater.

More than 200,000 acres were burned in Oklahoma in 2012. The Stillwater area lost approximately 400 homes due to wildfires.

Fire Marshal Trent Hawkins said the purpose of Firewise is to save lives and property through public education.

“A lot of times grass fires just involve grass and timber, but you get into situations like the last two years with drought,” he said. “Throughout the state homes, livestock, equipment, vehicles and valuables were lost. The potential is always there for loss of life. Anything we can do to lessen that impact on the community is a benefit to them and us as a department.”

Hawkins was responsible for bringing together a Firewise board to coordinate with the forestry department. The board then completed a risk assessment that had to be approved by the state. A plan was developed based on the assessment to minimize the chance of wildfires starting on the outside of town and spreading.

Hawkins said he reached out to people from all walks of life to be on the board.

“It’s important to understand that even though Firewise deals with the risk of a community to have a wildfire, it’s not a fire department program but a community program,” Hawkins said.

One of those members was Postdoctoral Research Associate Dirac Twidwell. Twidwell focuses on reducing wildfire fuels at the Department of National Resource Ecology and Management at Oklahoma State University.

Twidwell completed the Community Wildfire Hazard and Risk Assessment for Stillwater.

Twidwell said it’s a national program and assessments are being done in states across the U.S.

“We like aesthetically pleasing forest landscape next to houses — it’s a tradeoff between that and wildfire protection that we are dealing with here and in Texas, Colorado and California,” he said.

Stillwater had a range of low risk to just below high risk. Its overall rating was 91 on a scale of 170. The ratings were based on a sample of homes in a designated zone, not a rating for one home in particular.

Twidwell said one issue is the change of landscape in Oklahoma.

“It used to be prairie and now its cedar,” he said.

When eastern red cedar, southwest winds and timbers are combined, wildfire risk is high.

Twidwell said Stillwater’s rating could get better or worse, depending on a number of factors.

One is a large response from the public in those high risk areas. Now they can help reduce fires on their property at no cost.

The National Resources Conservation Services partnered with the state forestry department to offer grant money to property owners outside of the city limits.

Hawkins said the assessment focused on areas a mile outside the city limits.

Stillwater will serve as pilot city for how to reduce loss of property due to wildfires.

Factors included emergency vehicle access, roadways lined with highly flammable vegetation and amount of fuel load to a fire in these areas.

Hawkins said the goal is to have a defensive plan around a home.

“People might worry that the program is mandatory, but that’s not the purpose of Firewise,” he said. “It’s strictly volunteer.”

No matter what is accomplished, both Twidwell and Hawkins agree it will start a much needed conversation with the community to mitigate wildfires in the future.